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ABSTRACT

Many Canadian provinces are looking to Alberta for guidance about charter schools. This case study examines the closure of one charter school to identify the obstacles other schools may face. This study uses critical policy analysis and the "politics of interpretation" to examine the political context of educational policy issues. While linear models of policy analysis fail to allow for feedback, the approach used here includes a consideration of implicit and explicit rules and values, the interests of diverse groups, and the assumptions embodied in contrasting educational paradigms. Alberta's political climate, coupled with budget austerity during hard economic times, created pressures for reform driven by key stakeholders from the Ministry of Education and the community. There were no organized parental groups participating in the push toward charter schools, and legislation enabling pilot programs was advanced before substantial opposition emerged. A lack of clear regulations and changing government pronouncements complicated the efforts of early applicants. Factors that led to the demise of one of Alberta's first charter schools include confusion regarding the stated purpose of the charter mandate, a lack of training for charter board members, poor external monitoring, and an absence of fiscal accountability. The closure of this school shows how confusion stemming from Alberta's political context, a lack of clear regulations, and inadequate financial assistance contribute to the instability of the charter-school movement in Canada. (Contains 43 references.)(TEJ)

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THE CHARTER SCHOOL COLLAPSE: A CASE STUDY

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Canadian charter schools are a recent educational reform phenomenon. Only approved in the province of Alberta, these charter schools are in the formative stages and much knowledge about them is tentative. Many other provinces such as British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, and New Brunswick are now looking to Alberta for policy recommendations with regard to charter schools. From these charter schools, Canadian policy analysts and educators hope to learn from the early successes and failures for further consideration. This paper will critically analyze one of the first Alberta charter schools which attained great media exposure in its initial success and its eventual school closure two years later.

In order to accurately portray the rise and fall of one particular charter school, we must first set the conditions in which Alberta charter schools were created. From there, we can examine the internal tensions and weaknesses that lead to the closure of one charter school. Much can be learned from this one school, for while its closure was contentious and volatile, it is not necessarily unique. Other Canadian charter schools face the same potential problems and obstacles in their daily operations.

THE UNTOLD STORY: POLITICAL UNDERCURRENTS IN THE CHARTER SCHOOL MOVEMENT

Alberta charter schools have many, often overwhelming, internal obstacles to overcome. The portrayal of internal turmoil, that I will explicate later, could lead one to assume that the stakeholders have created their own problems, and to some extent, they have. However, this does not paint an entirely accurate picture. In order to more accurately examine the difficulties charter schools face through the discourse of choice, I must also look at the larger context surrounding this reform movement.

It is not that easy to simply relay the story of the political context of charter schools. Government documentation outlining the rationale and policy directives for charter schools is sparse. Legislative house discussion is limited as most of the charter policies have been developed through regulations, and to complicate matters further, few key people who were involved in the implementation of charter schools are willing to be interviewed. Finally, the speed of implementing this educational reform movement leaves little for interest groups in which to respond. As a result, I have tried to put pieces of the puzzle together, taking bits and pieces that relate to charter schools and placing them in some chronological order. This story is speculative and tentative as it is difficult to provide the chronology of Alberta charter schools without an abundance of evidence. As such, I tell this story as a possibility, attempting to bring key factors together.

Looking at four major themes that play a role in the implementation of charter schools including: the political and economic climate in Alberta; the key political figures and advocates of charter schools; the house debates in the legislative assembly; and the implementation of charter schools, I map the territory in which charter schools in Canada have been built. In the first section, I highlight a theoretical framework using critical policy analysis and the "politics of interpretation" (Peters & Marshall, 1996). This framework emphasizes the importance of examining the political context surrounding educational policy issues. The second section will then examine the four themes that have emerged in the Alberta charter school context.

POLITICS OF INTERPRETATION

In exploring the charter school policy implementation in Alberta, many facts and circumstances still need to be unearthed. Bits and pieces appear, but the story is sketchy and somewhat unattainable.

Furthermore, I am conscious of the fact that how I choose to portray this speculative analysis is value-laden and politically-loaded. One may assert that all policy analysis is not politically neutral; however, to acknowledge that it exists reminds the reader that research is always perspectival and should be read with that in mind. The acknowledgment that policy analysis is partial is reiterated by a number of authors in educational policy analysis who emphasize the importance and recognition of the inherent political and value-based research recent policy analysis entails (Goodson, 1986; Prunty; 1985; Mitchell, 1982; Peters & Marshall , 1996).

Central to analysing policies as "texts" is the notion of a "politics of interpretation" (Peters &Marshall, 1996). Politics of interpretation acknowledges that policy analysis is not politically neutral. Recognizing this, this form of policy analysis examines the underlying values, norms, and interests that underlie policy initiatives with the intent to give "new light" and meaning toward social change (Mitchell, 1982). Thus, it is arguable to suggest that such implicit "rules" comprise of the political and social context surrounding policy.

Critical policy analysis differs from previous forms of social policy research. Traditional types of social policy research often followed similar procedures for policy analysis. The first step of policy analysis often identified the problem - often defined as problem specification or problem orientation. This located the problem within the policy context to illustrate "official" values and interests within the dominant discourse. The second phase would then entail the development and structuring of alternative approaches. During this period, parameters would be explored as to the possibilities of implementation and development of the policy. The third step often analysed the ratification and acceptance of proposals into policy. Stage four examined policy implementation with the final stage being evaluation of the policy. However, this form of policy analysis has often been criticized for

being too linear, not allowing for feedback and interpretation throughout the process. What appears to be neglected is the ability to "undergo considerable shifts in meaning" (Peters & Marshall. 1996, p. 141). They further state:

> In the field of policy analysis defining the problem is both an interpretive and inherently politically loaded activity. Practitioners are frequently confronted with the dilemma of serious incompatibilities between rival accounts or interpretations of what constitutes 'the problem'. Discrepancies are often most serious, in some cases unresolvable, when practitioners are faced with interpretations of a problem proposed by policy-makers on the one hand and those of recipient populations on the other.
> (1996, p. 142)

To combat this problem, Peters and Marshall (1996) take a critical stance to analysing policy through a process of "evaluative context". Evaluative context takes into the policy context by considering the rules and values, explicit and implicit, and the diverse interest groups that define concepts and policies. Evaluative context then looks at "identifying the rules" by examining the dominant discourse and how it is played out in the articulation of policy directives. The third consideration looks at the larger community of interests and wider socio-political context and the interplay between policy and those interest groups. The fourth area analyses the "paradigm context" and "public interest" through postructural inquiry of showing the relations between concepts and underlying assumptions. The last consideration creates a cycle by reflecting and reconsidering the original problem for further interpretation. This allows for further insight within the policy analysis.

In the following section, I intend to use elements of critical policy analysis and politics of interpretation to provide a possible reading of the political undercurrents in the Alberta charter school movement. The following reading may shift in meaning and the problem may be redefined as more information is made available to the public. Perhaps it is a beginning, the opening of a door to understand the complexities surrounding the charter school movement and the problematic nature it

encounters both externally and internally.

1) The political and economic climate prior to charter schools

Alberta has been governed traditionally by right-wing political parties. Although Liberal parties have had brief moments of power (with the first provincial government being Liberal led by Alex Rutherford), for the most part, the province has only seen two major parties, the Social Credit party elected in 1935 until 1971, and the Conservative Party since that time. The apparent low-turnover of governmental power may suggest that Albertans are receptive to many right-wing fiscal and social reforms recently introduced (Mansell, 1997). The apparent lack of strong opposition to such policy initiatives may further create a conducive climate for massive, reforms with little resistance.

To understand the massive budgetary cuts of the 1990's, I must first briefly step back in time to set the stage for "Klein's Revolution" (Taft, 1997). With the changeover in government in 1971 from Social Credit to the Conservatives, premier Lougheed attempted to diversify the province's Gross Domestic Product. Realizing the potential volatility of relying mainly on the agricultural and petroleum sectors, Lougheed sought other economic opportunities to attract more business and migration to Alberta. Some of the policies were as follow: significant increase in resource revenue was spent; lower property tax; smaller business corporate tax; and, a reduction in taxes for motor fuels and personal income taxes (Bruce, Kneebone, & McKenzie, 1997). This strategy increased the real per capita revenues in the province. Furthermore, the government was still running fiscal surpluses.

The 1980's took a drastic turn with the introduction of the National Energy program, equalizing provinces' wealth, and in turn, demanding transfers out of Alberta to the Federal Government. By 1986, Alberta took another financial hit with the drastic fall in grain and oil prices. In that year,

Alberta would change from projecting a fiscal surplus to a fiscal deficit that would continue until 1995. By 1993, the government would run up a deficit of almost $3.4 billion with the possibility of continuing that figure to $6.5 billion by 1996/97 (Mansell, 1997). This deficit would be seen by the government as an economic crisis. Others suggest that this was just another "scare-tactic" by right-wing advocates to push for more fiscal restraint and public sector downsizing (Taft, 1997).

With the election of Klein in 1993, significant fiscal changes would soon follow. In the spring session with the new premier, the budget called for dramatic changes to provincial spending. A general twenty per cent cut across all public sectors was proposed. Fundamental restructuring of all public sectors to reduce spending would occur. Within a four year period, Klein set forth to eliminate the $3.4 billion deficit. Along the way, "sacred" social programmes such as health, education, and social services, would feel the brunt of the fiscal restraints and restructuring policies by taking significant cutbacks. Klein projected this fiscal plan, asking that all Albertans make a small sacrifice for the betterment of the province. This would be contested by Taft who argued that much of the "... debt servicing was rising [as] a result of massive business subsidies, high interest rates, and declining petroleum revenues (Taft, 1997, p. 62). According to Taft, Albertans would sacrifice public services in order to maintain private interests. Since the election of premier Ralph Klein, " ... not a month has gone by without a major government budgetary announcement or restructuring initiative" (Bruce, Kneebone, & McKenzie, 1997, p. 5). This would prove significant when analysing the political context and strategy perhaps used in establishing charter schools.

2) Stakeholders

As major budgetary cuts were being made, restructuring efforts were occurring in every department. Major plans to decentralize and devolve the local school board authority was occurring. The Speech from the Throne of February 10, 1994 would be a defining speech in restructuring education (Alberta Hansard, 1994a, p. 1). It was Klein's second year in power, and in the second year of a four year plan to balance its budget, he would target four public sector areas: health, education, advanced education, and social services (Alberta Hansard, 1994a, p.1). The next four months would prove to have rigorous debate in the Assembly over Bill 19 that brought in major amendments to the School Act, one of which was to establish charter schools.

To understand this development of proposing charter schools for Alberta, I have tried to step back for a moment and examine who the key stakeholders were. I have already mentioned premier Ralph Klein who set a mandate to balance the budget by 1996/97. This would have major implications for public education on how they would be governed, financed, and taxed. It appears that under this public sector restructuring, many proposals or alternatives would be considered that would fit with the fiscal policy in place. Charter schools could be set to fit in with the fiscal plan by creating site-based management, remove the middle layer of bureaucracy, and reduce expenditures by only giving per pupil grants without any capital funding.

During 1993/94, the Minister of Education was Halvar Jonson and Deputy Minister was Reno Bosetti. Both were key players in the development of charter schools. After the June 1993 election, the Minister began investigating the concept of charter schools from the literature that was available in the United States. By August 17, 1993 at an Education Officials Meeting, minutes show that the Minister requested the Deputy Minister to study the concept of charter schools (Bosetti, 1998c). In

September of 1993, the Policy and Planning Branch of Alberta Education produced a document entitled *Charter Schools: Provisions for Choice in Public Schools* (1993). Within another two months, charter schools would be added to the discussion for the proposed Education Roundtables. By January 1994, The Minister of Education announced his intent to introduce charter school legislation. This announcement would soon be followed with another public document, *Charter Schools Information Update: "What can we do while we are waiting for our details?"*(1994c); that would provide suggestions for interested groups who were considering making a charter school application. The intentions made by the Minister of Education through memos and information documents show clear indications that charter schools would be implemented before the proposed legislation was even brought to the Legislative Assembly.

Other vested advocates of charter schools are more difficult to locate in looking at who provided the catalyst for charter school legislation. Joe Freedman, a prominent alternatives-in-education Alberta advocate, wrote a critique on the failing attempts to provide quality public education (Freedman, 1993). He later wrote a book on charter schools in 1995 advocating their potential in reviving the quality of education. This project would be financially supported by the Donner Canadian Foundation, an organization that is a strong advocate of charter schools. In his acknowledgments, Freedman also expressed his gratitude for the contributions of Honourable Halvar Jonson and known United States charter school advocate, Ted Kolderie for their assistance (Freedman, 1995, p. 4). Freedman was an instrumental player in Alberta charter reform and later creating public awareness to the movement.

What is interesting to note, is the lack of any organized parent groups that were advocating the establishment of charter schools. There was a perception that many parents were dissatisfied with

public education due to a variety of reasons such as: funding cuts; larger class sizes, and; the appearance of more violence in public schools. Despite these frustrations, there was not any organized lobby group that advocated for charter schools. It was not until the introduction of the concept of charter schools that parents began to examine this potential educational alternative. This is significant because many believe that the Alberta charter school movement was a grassroot movement, instigated by parents, to combat the dissatisfaction of public education. However, from the documentation that I have collected, it appears that the charter school concept was initiated by a few government officials who may have thought that it fit in with their educational and fiscal policy.

3) House Debate

Bill 19 would alter much of the former School Act, including section 24.2 that allowed for the establishment of charter schools in Alberta. There has been much speculation that major reforms were done both swiftly and deeply in order that opponents would not have time to mobilize their efforts and challenge the government (Bruce, Kneebone, & McKenzie, 1997). This would be a major strategy used by Sir Roger Douglas, who was brought in to Alberta for consultation on the conservative reform agenda. Douglas argued that it was important to "...implement reform in quantum leaps. Moving step by step lets vested interests mobilise. Big packages neutralise them. Speed is essential... Once you start the momentum rolling never let it stop (Douglas, 1990 as cited in Sullivan, 1997, p. 253). This would prove to be an effective strategy as the limited time for debate given in the House and the enormity of the reforms often appeared to overwhelm the opposition. Many members grappled with Bill 19 on both sides of the Assembly, unclear of the policy implications it would have for not only charter schools, but public education as well. From the introduction of Bill 19 in January of 1994 to

May of 1994, members of the legislature attempted to analyse this major Bill given the short amount of time allotted.

Many concerns were brought to the legislature with regards to charter schools. The Liberal Education Critic could not understand the difference between community schools developing a charter outlining their purpose with charter schools (Alberta Hansard, 1994a, p. 619). Other members had concerns that charter schools could bypass their local school jurisdiction and apply directly to the Minister for charter school status. For many of the opposition, this both lessened the role of elected school trustees, and gave considerable power to the Minister (Alberta Hansard, 1994b, pp. 1139-1140).

It was clear from the Minister of Education, that his vision of charter schools was of an experimental nature. Repeatedly, Jonson answered that charter schools would be an experimental, pilot project that would be evaluated at a later date. This was clearly stated during question period when Jonson stated, "I think it's very important to note in terms of the announced plan that we would propose to pilot a number of chartered schools and evaluate them so we do not repeat the mistake that is often made in education of introducing an innovation without adequate follow up" (Alberta Hansard, 1994a, p. 9). While the intention was clear from the Minister of Education that only a limited number of charter schools would be piloted and evaluated, opposition still remained concerned that the concept of charter schools had either not been thoroughly thought out by the government, or if they were withholding their "true" intentions from the legislative assembly. This was stated by Bruseker, a member of the Legislative Assembly:

> I have some difficulty with the proposed outline for charter schools. I've not heard a clear answer from the Premier, I've not heard a clear answer from the Minister of Education as to what it is that's being proposed, even in the case of pilot schools. I guess if we're going to go with a pilot program, the question is: what are you piloting? You've got to have some idea of where you're going, because if you try to be the pilot

> of a plane and you don't know where you're going, the end result is that you're going to crash. I'm afraid that's what's going to happen... I guess what I'm saying is that if you're going to have charter schools, tell us how you're going to measure it, tell us how you're going to evaluate it before you begin, rather than simply saying, 'Let's do it and see what happens.' That's what I'm asking for. I'll leave that as food for thought for the members opposite.
>
> (Alberta Hansard, 1994c, pp. 1644-1645)

Despite calls from the opposition to more clearly define the concept of charter schools within Bill 19, very few amendments were considered by the government. In fact, the government invoked closure of all three readings after very little debate. Even after nine pages of amendments to the entirety of Bill 19, closure was invoked the next day after only three hours of house debate (Alberta Hansard, 1994c, p. 2119).

Much of the charter school concept would not be discussed in the Legislative Assembly. With the exception of one section in Bill 19 that allowed the province to establish charter schools, all other details would be discussed in regulations. This meant that the legislative assembly would not have the opportunity for input or debate. Furthermore, it would also display the unconventional manner in which a major policy document could escape public criticism. It appears that the charter school concept, consciously or unconsciously, would be kept away from public exposure by writing up much of the policy behind caucus doors.

4) Implementation of charter schools

Despite comforting words by the Minister of Education who stated that "we do not repeat the mistake that is often made in education of introducing an innovation without adequate follow-up" (Alberta Hansard, 1994a, p. 9), it appears that that is exactly what occurred after the passage of Bill 19. Although the government had assured the House that regulations would be in place by fall of 1994,

no regulations were developed by the spring of 1995 (Alberta Hansard, 1995a, p. 618). This would prove difficult for charter school applicants who were attempting to write an application without the regulations in place. As a result, many of the applicants worked on their charter applications before the regulations were developed. By June, 1995, regulations would finally be released with charter school applicants having only two months to set up their charter school.

To complicate the story of implementing charter schools in Alberta the government had allocated one main person within Alberta Education, Ron Babiuk, to develop the vision of Alberta charter schools. Unlike many of the United State's Education departments where often there is an entire department devoted to charter schools (Nathan, 1996), Babiuk did not have a department to work on charter schools. Furthermore, no university within Alberta had created a policy institute to develop research to help support charter schools. These two support systems, often key in most states in the United States, were not prevalent in the Alberta context. It appeared that the charter school vision was left to one person in Alberta Education to develop charter school policy. This would prove to be a serious flaw in the consistency in policy and development of charter schools. In the winter of 1995/96, Babiuk had an untimely death. With his death, a clear vision of Alberta charter schools appeared to be lost with the person. The government quickly needed to find a replacement and hired another person who would be given a 0.4 position to continue to develop charter schools in Alberta. This would appear to be insufficient for many charter schools to receive the required support and assistance from Alberta Education to start-up charter schools relatively smooth.

From the passage of charter schools in the spring of 1994 to the spring of 1998, one also notes the changes of position in the Ministry of Education, giving uncertainty to the government's vision of charter schools. While Jonson had pushed for the establishment of charter schools through Bill 19,

it is unclear whether the proceeding Minister of Education, Gary Mar, held the same vision. Very little has been said by Mar as to where he believed charter schools were going. At one point, Mar has been reported as saying that, "They're testing grounds for innovative teaching methods that can later be applied to a public-school model" (Kalef, 1998, p.14). With the change of portfolios within the Minister of Education in the last year, charter schools must again wait and see whether they will be supported by the new Minister.

This makes some charter school individuals nervous as they feel that much time and energy was not expended only to have their charter assimilated back into mainstream public schools (Personal Fieldnotes, 03/21/98). At another time, Alberta Education has stated that if charter schools meet their requirements then they would be renewed for another contract period (Personal Fieldnotes, 03/21/98). These discrepancies have proved to be very frustrating for many charter schools, unclear of their future. At a provincial charter school meeting (Personal Fieldnotes, 05/09/98), many charter school representatives stated that they hoped the government would evaluate and reflect on Alberta charter schools, providing a clear vision for the future. To date, no public announcement has been made as to the government's vision is for charter schools and their renewal for the future.

I now turn to one charter school, to see how the various factors contributed to the internal volatility and eventual closure of one charter school.

AN INSIDE LOOK AT ONE SCHOOL

Much can be said about this particular charter school in Alberta. At the height of media exposure in 1996, articles from across the country highlighted the early successes of this school. It had reached full capacity in the first year. Students were ranked consistently in the top percentile of

standardized provincial test scores in the province, and plans to create satellite schools based on this model were considered by the administration throughout the suburbs of the city. This school was considered to be the exemplary pilot project for all charter schools in Canada. Yet, within two and half years, it came to a crashing halt, with the closure of the school by the Minister of Education. What lead to the demise of this charter school? Could it happen to others?

Factors leading to the demise of this particular charter school can be pointed to: 1) confusion over the stated purpose of the charter mandate; 2) lack of training of charter board members; 3) lack of a regular external monitoring process to guide and assist the troubled charter school, and; 4) absence of fiscal accountability. Each of these factors will be explicated in further detail to better portray the obstacles and challenges the charter school faced.

1) Confusion over the stated purpose of the charter mandate

Providing an innovative educational program to enhance student learning, and being held accountable through performance-based measures appear to be the two prevalent agendas of the charter school movement (Alberta Education, 1996a). All evaluations and assessments are based upon these two criteria for charter renewal. Although charter schools strive for success in these areas, one charter school was led astray by the numerous interpretations of the stated charter school mandate. One teacher noted the difficulty of implementing a cohesive educational mandate on a continual basis, "...we are all coming to the understanding of differentiation. How it happens in a school very much depends on how a school makes it happen. (Teacher, October 3, 1997)." Yet, another teacher pointed out that instilling an educational program that was different from mainstream schools was difficult for parents to accept:

> A lot of times, the change that often parents are asking is basing it on their own education. And they are saying well you know , give me worksheets and we can do this. But when you are giving students worksheets, they do serve a purpose, but it's not the entire teaching. And a lot of times you need the extra work, but we don't want to do drill and practice, and drill and kill things. So there are a lot of times where parents will go and will be asking some of those things.

While teachers appeared to have a vision of the educational mandate set forth by the charter, parents often have differing priorities than the stated educational mandate. One parent who sent their children to this charter school was looking for something different. She wanted her children:

> ... To be with a group of children who are arriving at the school to basically be looked after, and cared for - who are fed before they come to school, who are dressed properly, who don't have behavior problems due to a lack of discipline or input from the parents or control or whatever.

For this particular parent, the educational mandate was not of paramount concern. She was forthright in her opinion to make certain that her children were with other children that were properly cared for and disciplined. For her, the charter school was a site where certain "undesirable" students would be weeded out through the admission process.

When I discussed the educational mandate with the administrator, he too had a vision of the school:

> I think that the methodology that we employ is called differentiation, an education buzz word. What that means is basically is methodologies that challenge every student at all levels according to ability groups... We use a teacher facilitator approach within a critical thinking environment as opposed to a teacher-centered approach in a teacher directed environment.

Despite the administrator's attempt to provide a cohesive educational program, he too had difficulties with the competing agendas within the school:

> I think in our first year, I had fifty separate requests for differing types of programs related to the instructional program that goes on in the classrooms. So for example, teams at noon, activities, science clubs, so on so forth. Fifty separate requests is a lot. And to me, that is getting pulled in too many directions. And unless you manage your growth through a clear set of objectives that everyone has to agree to. It can spread your energies in too many directions, and cause you to not do well. Our core purpose, our objectives is to get better results with kids, and to provide leadership in an innovative educational purpose. That is our purpose. Anything that detracts from that, we really don't question.

Despite attempts to maintain a strong educational mandate, divisions became apparent by the winter of 1998. Lobby groups among parents, charter board members, staff and administration were clear. Memoranda were distributed publicly to sway opinion within the school. Town hall meetings were called to resolve the divisive tensions, but to no avail. The tensions had exacerbated to breaking point, which halted negotiations and any hope of compromise. The educational mandate flittered away with the increasing clash of values.

Internal conflicts may contribute to the ineffectiveness of charter schools in developing innovative educational programs (Smith, 1995). Personal agendas attempt to "name" and interpret the educational mission of the charter school (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993). This particular charter school had considerable conflict as parents, teachers, administrator, and charter board members appeared to have different interpretations of the educational mandate of the school (Sheppard, 1998). This created a disunified educational vision and weakened the effectiveness of the program. Henig (1996) suggests that despite the attempt to create a unified educational vision through a charter mandate, individual interests often fragment a collective vision. This was such the case in this charter school where stakeholders vied for power, each trying to project a "louder" voice. Individuals tried to gain influence and position with the charter school hierarchy to instil their values. Instead of creating an atmosphere

that "empowers" individuals, charter schools may exacerbate power differentials (Ball, 1994). As a result, a provincially appointed trustee recommended to the Minister of Education that the school be closed at the end of the 1998 school year (Marshall & Stewart, 1998).

2) Lack of training for charter board members

The lack of training for charter board members appear to be a consistent problem in most charter schools across Alberta. At the time of the charter school closure, few attempts to provide workshops, seminars, or inservices for charter board members were available. A provincial charter school association was just being founded, and little attention had been given to the need for training. Some superintendents assigned to charter schools had made attempts to provide training sessions and workshops for charter board members, but this was inconsistent from school to school. Little to no training was provided for the charter board members at this particular charter school.

Charter board members were cognizant of their lack of experience and expertise in managing a school. One charter board member states the biggest hindrance was the lack of knowledge and experience on the board:

> The first was that you are dealing with a combination of parent volunteers and educational professionals. The parent volunteers who give their time and energy, and the level of commitment and understanding, wasn't perhaps sufficient in and of itself to carry this thing through the approval process and we needed to go through.

While volunteers were appreciated for the countless number of hours they gave to try to make the charter school successful, this did not necessarily balance out the defined roles and responsibilities of the charter board. Ambiguously defined roles often led to internal conflicts among charter board members and also with administration:

> I think other people on the board, see themselves because they are board members, having some authority to intrude on the administration issues. To get involved with the administration of the school. Now, personally and philosophically I have a real difference of opinion.

Yet, other charter board members felt that they had a responsibility to scrutinize the administration of the school, as te felt that the daily operation of the school was not being fulfilled:

> We have support staff who were not provided contracts. Currently, they don't have contracts. That is something that we are working with. And then, something that - there's communication. We were under the understanding that at the board there are contracts, and if they are not, we defer to the CBE [Calgary Board of Education]. As a board, you rely on that, and accepted that. And then, upon further review by the board it appears that they didn't have contracts. They weren't being paid overtime.... As a result, some board members have been doing some of the tasks because we didn't want a band-aid solution.

> What happens which I am sure you are aware of, is the board is being perceived of doing something that is not supported by administration. For example, the review of administration which is totally within business practice of any organization. Bad feelings come up and you start getting people who are second guessing you. Why are they doing this to us? Why? Why? Why? And we say because we want to improve to make this work. We are probably getting a bit killed right now with rumors.

Perhaps more charter board members would have hesitated having known the amount of difficulty an ambiguously defined charter would create. An understanding of the tremendous undertaking of establishing and managing a school many have lead others to reconsider.

Many of the charter board members stated that had they had someone to consult with and give advise, this would have alleviated many of the mistakes that occurred in the school. Others sought moral support from other charter school individuals to share ways in developing a stable school setting. From the perspective of charter board members, there was no vehicle to seek guidance. Consequently,

this charter school floundered in their daily operations of the school.

3) Lack of a Regular External Monitoring Process

Underlying any successful reform measures often lies a solid support mechanism in which to give strength to a movement. This appears to be one of the main weaknesses found in the Alberta charter school movement. This has been reiterated since charter schools were first introduced in the Legislative Assembly up the present date. "Vague and ambiguous regulations are causing problems for Alberta's charter schools and the public schools boards that monitor them, according to board officials and parents" (Thomson, 1998, A7). The lack of clarity in charter school policy set by the provincial government appears to have caused a ripple effect that reverberates from the ministry down to individual stakeholders in charter schools. It is further exacerbated by a lack of technical and financial support that is often seen in the United States. In many of the states corporate and private donations are often given towards capital funds for new charter schools. Other states may have a university that creates a policy institute for the sole purpose of developing research on charter schools. For Alberta, little or no external support is given to the struggling charter school. Monitoring appears to be insufficient to maintain the level of contact and support that the charter school often requires (Kalef, 1998).

The feeling of isolation appears to be common among charter school stakeholders where they receive little or no support from the local school board, the under-staffed personnel at Alberta Education, the superintendents, and the local universities. One charter board member states her frustration:

> ... The handbook doesn't tell the whole truth about the amount of time

> and effort - perhaps Alberta Education could set up some sort of group that could come and help parents understand what they are walking into because it is one thing to have a group of parents, or educators saying that I am going to change the face of education, or a group of parents saying I want my kids in this school and not to know. I mean I have learnt so much in the last two years it's amazing. It is not just from the educational side, it is from the legal side, the accounting side, how the budgets work, how you need to recruit things, how you need to pass the budget, how you just can't take money from here because you feel like it. I think it is really important that parents know that. You can't go into something like this without - you can't be experts about everything.

Once or twice a year an external monitor comes into a charter school for one or two days to observe the daily operations of schools. This, coupled with inconsistent superintendency support, provides little continued support for on-going problems and dilemmas. Only when the situation is in crisis, as this charter school was, does there appear to be a concerted effort to bring in external monitors to try and save the school. This, however, is a band-aid solution that did not work in this case. Continued external support and monitoring may have helped to prevent the closure of the school had they noticed the numerous problems that they were encountering.

4) Lack of Fiscal Accountability

The last factor that ultimately sealed the fate of this charter school was the lack of fiscal accountability. As has been mentioned earlier, charter school are evaluated on their alternative educational mandate, outcomes-based results, and their fiscal accountability (Alberta Education, 1996a). This particular charter school had numerous fiscal irregularities during their two year period. Contracts were not signed by support staff or the administration (Field notes, October 30, 1997). Projects were initiated by various committees with little coordination among administration and the charter board that were not well thought through:

> They [administration] wanted to - last year - raise money for portables, and had we not said no, we would have ended up with portables in a site that we are not permanent in. Another thing is the playground. We had a group of parents who were very proactive and took the bull by the horns, and just went ahead and did it. In their presentation to us - we raised some concerns about grants. Well if we take this grant, can we go back and get it again, and we can't. Well, can we take the playground with us, and we're not sure. And we said let's just wait a minute here and think about it. But they got an okay and so they proceeded. And that's fine, but the thing is we - that was just $35,000. And we're talking about hundreds of thousands, you don't want to screw up.

Despite attempts to be fiscally responsible, this charter board member realized the potential closure of the charter school due to its fiscal difficulties:

> One of the things that has come out of a lot of the reports, is that the failure of charter schools is finance. It is not the program, it is the business part of it. If you are not fiscally responsible in any business, you go bankrupt. And I guess that is where we are trying to educate customers that we have to be responsible, we have to follow the rules, we have to comply to legislation, and that's the bottom line. That is where you need the dedication.

However, the priority to run a fiscally fit school appeared to be somewhat at odds with the administration. For him, the educational needs needed to be balanced with a corporate vision:

> Typically, I think where we could get really side-tracked, which is one of our worries, is the product which is the child and the educational process, guaranteeing that you run the business side of the school in a highly excellent and efficient manner may not necessarily give in to the product of the child. And I think we need to work in those areas to make sure that we are acting responsibility in the business area and yet our thrust and our focus and our time and our energy, innovative thought areas and educational areas, we get pulled into the business area. And we are trying to resist. And unfortunately, educators do have a lot of knowledge about how things are done, but we also don't have any knowledge about the accounting and the levels of accountability... My view is that the kid is at the top. And when you have business people and accountants and lawyers, all skilled people, we have them coming from that culture and top-down management. When we read

> the legislation the ultimate responsibility is the boards. And you have conflicting philosophical thrusts which really need to be worked out. We are in the midst of that kind of thing right now.

Budgetary conflicts were apparent in all areas of the school in terms of payroll, facility, projects, and accounting procedures. Financial decisions were often not taken to the charter board to be approved and informed. Accounting procedures became sketchy and incomplete when an external audit was done. As a result, a forensic audit was initiated to review all fiscal practices at the school (Marshall, 1998).

UNCERTAINTY IN A UNCERTAIN MOVEMENT

In reviewing the external political conditions of the Alberta charter school movement and looking critically at the factors that contributed to the closure of one Alberta charter school, it appears that one should not be surprised at the instability of the movement. Despite the Minister of Education's stated intention of creating more innovation within public education, I suspect that he did not expect the number of unintended ripple effects that charter schools would create. Policy analysts assume that there will inevitably be unintended consequences. Furthermore, the more elaborate the intention, the more room there is for unintended results (Wildavsky, 1987). Wildavsky opens up the notion of intention when he poses a number of questions: "What do rational actors intend to do? Move toward their goals. But in what direction? How can we be goal-directed if we don't know what our goal is until we get there?" (Wildasky, 1987, p. 135). It is the proverbial tail wagging the dog. One may begin to wonder whether charter schools were well researched by the government. As one charter school parent states, "There were lots of things that weren't done. Whose fault was that? I think there was a trail of responsibility that goes back to the ministry... It was just an idea, a half-baked idea. A

good idea, but it was never thought through" (Kalef, 1998, p. 16). Perhaps she is right in saying that the government did not follow through with an initial policy directive with thorough development and analysis of the concept. I speculate that this is a possible interpretation of the Alberta charter school movement. As has happened many times in educational government initiatives, the story rings similar with charter schools. The government learned of a new educational reform occurring in both New Zealand and the United States. It appears that they briefly scanned some literature on the notion. Seeing that charter schools could fit in with their major educational and fiscal reforms, they decided to investigate the reform further and introduce it into the legislature. House debate provided little discussion on the matter as a result of the numerous and tremendous other educational amendments occurring at the same time. Passage was granted for charter schools, and was then left for a few government officials to further develop charter school policy in regulations. Due to a lack of personnel, time, and funding, regulations did not come out until a year later, and when it did it was arguably very sketchy and ambiguous. As a result, the charter school movement has been left to charter school stakeholders to fend for themselves, unsupported by little or any government assistance. Lack of a clear vision on the government's part exacerbates the instability of the charter school movement.

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